

Johnston County Natural Areas Inventory

HOWELL WOODS

Site Number: 26

Site Significance: State

Ownership: Trustees of Johnston Community
College; private

Size: about 3535 acres

Quadrangles: Four Oaks NE,
Newton Grove North

SIGNIFICANT FEATURES: This is the most significant terrestrial natural area in the county. It contains several square miles of good to excellent Coastal Plain Bottomland Hardwoods, and smaller amounts of Cypress-Gum Swamp (and probably Coastal Plain Small Stream Swamp). In addition, a small streamhead pocosin with Atlantic white cedar (*Chamaecyparis thyoides*) is present, as are slightly drier sites with a scattering of longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*). A total of three rare plants and four rare animals, along with eight more Watch List plant and animal species, have been found at the site, far more than anywhere in the county.

LANDSCAPE RELATIONSHIPS: The natural area is a portion of the Middle Neuse River Macrosite that extends from I-95 into western Wayne County. Howell Woods is located on the south side of the river near the center of this roughly 20-air-mile-long floodplain (between Smithfield on the northwest and Goldsboro on the southeast), which ranges up to four or five miles in width. The preserve is the largest extent of intact forest remaining in the macrosite. Directly across the river on the north is the Brogden Bottomlands, and the Cowbone Oxbows/Sage Pond Natural Area lies just upstream. Within one-half mile to the west of the western tip of Howell Woods property is the Hannah Creek Sandhill.

SITE DESCRIPTION: The natural area described here includes most of the 2,856 acres of the Howell Woods tract, plus some additional acreage of inholdings. The tract contains one large inholding, most of which is cultivated fields. However, some excellent forest land is present on this inholding, as well.

In 1993, Rudolph Howell donated nearly five square miles of land to Johnston Community College to establish the Rudolph Howell and Son Environmental Learning Center. A learning center building was constructed in 1998. The land is managed for wildlife, education opportunities, and various low-impact, quiet recreation. Various programs, training sessions, and meetings are held at the learning center and on the grounds of the property. The center is staffed by several biologists, who also conduct research on the property.

For some unknown reason, this large tract was overlooked as a significant natural area in the Albemarle-Pamlico Estuarine Study (Smith et al. 1993). However, the adjacent large tract across the river-- the Brogden Bottomlands -- was known to the N.C. Natural Heritage Program as a significant area. Howell Woods is predominantly a wetland site that is crisscrossed by many small tributary streams. Most of the land is only slightly wet and contains Bottomland Hardwoods, Brownwater subtype natural community. Along these streams, some of which are